AA Car test

R9722A
See also R9671
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TEST EXTRA

Renault Clio RN Zoom

What's different?
Incongruous name plus extra stripes and decals outside. One pedal less inside, making this a clutch-free manual.

SAAB CALLS ITS SYSTEM "SENSONIC" and charges £750 extra for it; now Renault has achieved a first by offering an automatic clutch on its Clio 1.2 for just under £600, compared with the standard RN.

Wedded to maintaining a youth-oriented image, Renault has tilted this Clio's promotion accordingly. We see it, however, as a real boon to less able, the elderly or seriously disabled drivers who must drive with only one foot, not to mention those whose motoring is mostly in congested traffic.

How does it work? Well, the inception of conventional gear lever movement transmits information to a microprocessor, which actuates an electro-hydraulic master cylinder to operate the clutch disengagement mechanism. All the driver has to do is lift the accelerator in the normal way and move the lever; whether the accelerator is reapplied or not (on the overrun) after the new gear is selected, the clutch re-engages smoothly, just like a good driver should.

Results are impressive, with most objections boiling down to problems of unfamiliarity. Not least in the tendency to forget to change gear at all, especially when slowing down. If you do attempt to pull away from rest in a ratio other than first or second, a warning chime sounds, but the engine doesn't stall. The same thing will happen if you're in too high a gear for sensible acceleration and engine speed.

There are times when to help you out and to keep things smooth, the mechanism will "ride its own clutch" and permit quite a lot of slip as the car gets under way in what was really too high a gear. The tachometer bears witness to this and under our deliberate abuse (such as holding the car stationery on the brake and pressing the accelerator a bit, at the same time) the poor old clutch plates exuded the acrid aroma of protest. So be warned: this mechanism could wear prematurely in the cause of keeping things sweet and flattering for the inconsiderate driver. The

microchip has one or two other precautions up its sleeve, however; you can't start the car in gear or get under way with any door open.

Unlike many automatics, this Clio doesn't "creep" in gear, but sits in traffic halts or on a hill just like its conventional equivalent. This is where the wide brake pedal (with adjacent footrest) is valuable – two-foot operation of accelerator and brake at such times makes hill starts easy.

The big question is whether this semi-automatic way of motoring is worth the extra, or is it better to go the whole hog and buy a "proper" automatic. Mechanically, autos using torque converters are very convenient, but they're notoriously inefficient, doing nasty things to both the performance and fuel economy of smaller cars, in particular.

Continuously variable belt-driven transmissions (CVTs) are a better proposition, of course, but Renault doesn't have one in any of its cars. Instead, it has invested in this automatic clutch system, called "Easy transmission", which takes away a lot of the hassle of constant gearchanging, yet will leave the host car's performance and economy completely unaffected. All the figures quoted in our report R9671 apply here.

VERDICT

Pity this model isn't cheaper, but otherwise, we give Renault's initiative the thumbs up; it's well thought out, with no serious snags in sensible daily use. In fact, it's an old concept resurrected (remember the Renault Dauphine with "Ferlec" auto clutch?), but the technology that made it fail in the fifties has been superseded by the ubiquitous microchip. It's enough to ensure success and we think that others are bound to follow Renault's lead, especially in their smaller cars.

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